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Uncovering the CIA: Is congressional oversight needed?

By Editorial Research Reports

The past two years have not been kind to the American intelligence community in general, and especially not to the Central Intelligence Agency.

Tainted by Watergate, the CIA is taking it on the chin for having spent $8 million to "destabilize" the Marxist regime of Chile's late president, Salvador Allende. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee immediately launched an investigation into the matter.

In addition, Sens. Howard H. Baker (R) of Tennessee and Lowell P. Weicker (R) of Connecticut have introduced legislation to establish a 14-member congressional oversight committee for all federal agencies with intelligence functions. These include not only the CIA but also the FBI, Secret Service, Defense Intelligence Agency, and National Security Agency.

The idea of an intelligence oversight committee is hardly a new one. In an extensive survey of the intelligence community in 1966, a team of New York Times reporters found that the "overwhelming consensus" of those interviewed was that Congress should not attempt to "control" the CIA through a special committee. It was felt such a panel "might become a new intelligence empire on Capitol Hill that could exert a direct policy influence on the CIA separate from and challenging the President's policy decisions."

Covert activities

If the CIA did nothing but gather and evaluate intelligence, it would have few critics. But the agency also engages in covert political operations abroad, and these occasionally have brought it into disrepute. The disastrous invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 is perhaps the classic example of a bungled CIA adventure. From time to time the agency's intelligence-gathering activities also cause embarrassment, as when the U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960.

President Ford and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger both defended the CIA's covert activities in Chile as in the best interests of that country as well as of the United States. Others are not so certain.

"Special operations pose dangers not only to the nations against which they are directed, but to ourselves," wrote David Wise and Thomas B. Ross in "The Invisible Government," a book about the U.S. intelligence community. "They raise the question of how far a free society, in attempting to preserve itself, can emulate a closed society without becoming indistinguishable from it."

Apprehension justified

The CIA's involvement in Watergate, limited and reluctant though it was, has raised questions about the nature of the agency's activities within the United States. Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, authors of a recent book about the CIA, say that Americans are justified in feeling apprehensive.

"Nurtured in the adversary setting of the cold war," they wrote, "shielded by secrecy, and spurred on by patriotism that views dissent as a threat to the national security, the clandestine operatives of the CIA have the capability, the resources, the experience — and the inclination — to ply their skills increasingly on the domestic scene."

The CIA's capacity to defend itself against such attacks is limited by its overriding need to operate in secret. To provide a detailed rebuttal might expose sensitive matters of national security. Still, the mover for greater congressional oversight of the CIA is gathering force and may become law.